# A LETTER FROM PERCY B. SHELLEY. TO T. PEACOCK, JULY MDCCCXVI.

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## NOTE.

THIS LETTER WAS PUBLISHED IN MDCCCXVII. IN "A SIX WEEKS' TOUR," BUT IS THERE PRESENTED IN A FRM SO DIFFERENT FROM THE ORIGINAL LETTER, THAT IT SEEMS ADVISABLE TO REPRINT IT EXACTLY AS IT WAS FIRST WRITTEN.

HOTEL DE LONDRES,
CHAMOUNIX.

July 22. 1816.

My dear Peacock

Whilst you are engaged in securing a home for us, we are wandering in search of recollections to embellish it. I do not err in conceiving that you are interested in details of all that is majestic or beautiful in nature.—But how shall I describe to you the scenes by which I am now surrounded.—To exhaust epithets which express the astonishment & the admiration—the very excess of satisfied expectation, where expectation scarcely acknowledged any boundary —is this to impress upon your mind the images which fill mine now, even until it overflows? I too had read before now the raptures of travellers. I will be warned by their example. I will simply detail to you, all that I can relate, or all that if related I could enable you to conceive of what we have done or seen since the morning of the 20th when we left Geneva.—

The plains which surround Geneva, and intervene between that city and the Alps are interesting and pretty.—After four hours travelling we arrived at Bonneville, a little town situated on the Arve which here runs through a valley enclosed between two lofty mountains clothed with wild forests of pine and chestnut.—Proceeding from Bonneville, the road winds along the foot of the mountains, thro' the woods. In three hours more we arrived at Cluses, and suddenly turning to the right enter a narrow pass where the Arve appears

to have forced its way & to have left on each side in ruins, the perpendicular mountains.—The scene resembles that of Matlock differing only in the immensity of its proportions. From Cluse to St. Martin (in the map it is called Sallanches) the character of the scenery continues the same, the mountains perpetually becoming more elevated, and exhibiting at every turn of the road more craggy summits, loftier waterfalls—wider extent of forests, darker and more deep recesses. At St. Martin we sleep.—From St. Martin we ascend on mules to Chamounix accompanied by two guides who held the mules on which Mary and Clare rode. For an hour, we proceed along the valley of the Arve—a valley surrounded on all sides by immense mountains whose jugged precipices were intermixed on high with dazzling snow: Their base was still covered with the eternal forest which perpetually grew darker & profounder as it approached the regions of snow.—After having visited a waterfall which was very fine we turned to the left and still following the valley, or now rather the vast ravine which is the couch and the creation of the terrible Arve, approached Chamounix. We ascended winding between mountains whose immensity staggers the imagination.—We crossed the path of a torrent which three days since had descended from the snow and torn the road away. We dined at Servox, a little village where there are lead and copper mines, and where we saw a cabinet like those of Keswick & Bethgelert.—We saw in this cabinet some chamois horns, and the horns of an exceed-

ingly rare animal called the Bouctin. This animal inhabits the deserts of snow which lie to the south of Mont Blanc. It is an animal of the goat kind but considerably larger, the horns weigh at least 25 English pounds, it is inconceivable how so small an animal should support so inordinate a weight. These horns are of a very peculiar formation, being broad massy & pointed at the end & surrounded with a number of rings which are supposed to afford an indication of its age. There were seventeen of these rings on the largest horns. —From Servox, three leagues remain to Chamounix. Mont Blanc was before us. The Alps with their innumerable glaciers on high, all around; closing in the complicated windings of the single vale:—forests inexpressibly beautiful—but majestic in their beauty—interwoven beech and pine & oak overshadowed our road or receded whilst lawns of such verdure as I have never seen before, occupied these openings, and extending gradually becoming darker with their recesses.—Mont Blanc was before us but was covered with cloud, and its base furrowed with dreadful gaps was seen alone. Pinnacles of snow, intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc shone thro' the clouds at intervals on high. I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness—And remember this was all one scene. It all pressed home to our regard and to our imagination.—Though it embraced a great number

of miles the snowy pyramids which shot into the bright blue sky seemed to overhang our path—the ravine, clothed with gigantic pines and black with its depth below—so deep that the very roaring of the untameable Arve which rolled through it could not be heard above—was close to our very footsteps. All was as much our own as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others, as now occupied our own.—Nature was the poet whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest.

As we entered the valley of Chamounix (which in fact may be considered as a continuation of those which we have followed from Bonneville and Cluses) clouds hung upon the mountains, at the distance perhaps of 6000 feet from the earth, but so as effectually to conceal not only Mont Blanc, but the other 'aiguilles' as they call them here, attached & subordinate to it.—We were travelling along the valley, when suddenly we heard a sound as of a burst of smothered thunder rolling above.—Yet there was something earthly in the sound that told us it could not be thunder. Our guide hastily pointed out to us a part of the mountain opposite from whence the sound came.—It was an avalanche. We saw the smoke of its path among the rocks & continued to hear at intervals the bursting of its fall. It fell on the bed of a torrent which it displaced and presently we saw the torrent also spread itself over the ravine which was its couch.—We arrived at Chamounix at 6 o'clock. —We did not as we had designed, visit the glacier de Boisson today, altho' it comes within a few min-

utes walk of the road wishing to survey it at leasure when unfatigued. We saw this glacier which comes close to the fertile plain. Its surface is irregularly broken into a thousand unaccountable figures. Conical and pyramidal crystallizations more than 50 feet in height rise from its surface, & precipices of ice of a dazzling splendour overhang the woods and meadows of the vale. This glacier winds from the valley until it joins the masses of frost from which it was produced above, winding thro' its own ravine like a bright belt flung over the black region of pines. There is more in all these scenes than mere magnitude of proportion—there is a majesty of outline, there is an awful grace in the very colour which invest these wonderful shapes—a charm which is peculiar to them, quite distinct even from the reality of their unutterable greatness.

CHAMOUNIX 24th—
Yesterday morning we went to the source of the Arveiron. It is about a league from the village—The river rolls impetuously from an arch of ice, and spreads itself in many streams over a vast space of the valley ravaged and laid bare by its inundations. The glacier by which its waters are nourished overhangs this cavern & the plain and the forests of pines which surround it with terrible precipices of solid ice. On the other side rises the immense glacier of Montanvert, 50 miles in extent occupying a chasm among mountains of inconceivable height and of forms so pointed and abrupt that they seem to pierce the sky. From

this glacier we saw as we sat on a rock close to one of the streams of the Arveiron, masses of ice detach themselves from on high, and fall with a loud dull noise into the vale. The violence of their fall turned them into powder which flowed over the rocks in imitation of the waterfalls whose ravines they usurped and filled. In the evening Mary and Clara remained at home and I went with Ducrè my guide the only tolerable person I have seen in this country, to visit the glacier of Boisson. This glacier like that of Montanvert comes close to the vale, overhanging the green meadows and the dark woods with the dazzling whiteness of its precipices and pinnacles. These glaciers flow perpetually into the valley ravaging in their slow but irresistible progress the pastures and the forests which surround them, and performing a work of desolation in ages which a river of lava might accomplish in an hour, but far more irretrievably—for where the ice has once been the hardiest plant refuses to grow—if ever, as in some extraordinary instances, it should recede after its progression has once commenced. The glaciers perpetually move onwards at the rate of a foot each day with a motion which commences at the spot where on the boundaries of perpetual congelation they are produced by the freezing of the waters which arise from the partial melting of the eternal snows. They drag with them from the regions whence they derive their origin all the ruins of the mountain, enormous rocks, and immense accumulations of sand & stones. These are driven onwards by the irresistible progress of the stream

of solid ice and when they arrive at a declivity of the mountain sufficiently rapid, roll down scattering ruin. I saw one of these rocks which had descended in the spring—winter here is the season of silence and safety—which measured 40 feet in every direction. The verge of a glacier, like that of Boisson, presents the most vivid image of desolation that it is possible to conceive. No one dares to approach it, for the enormous pinnacles of ice perpetually fall, & are perpetually reproduced. —The pines of the forest which bounds it at one extremity are overthrown & shattered:—there is something inexpressibly dreadful in the aspect of the few branchless trunks which nearest to the ice rifts still stand in the uprooted soil. The meadows perish overwhelmed with sand and stones. Within this last year these glaciers have advanced three hundred feet into the valley. Saussure the naturalist says that they have their periods of increase and decay—the people of the country hold an opinion entirely different, but as I judge, more probable. It is agreed by all that the snows on the summit of Mont Blanc and the neighbouring mountains perpetually augment, and that ice in the form of glacier subsists without melting in the valley of Chamounix during its transient and variable summer. If the snow which produces the glaciers must augment and the heat of the valley is no obstacle to the perpetual subsistence of such masses of ice as have already descended into it, the consequence is obvious.—The glaciers must augment and will subsist at least until they have overflowed this vale.—I will not pursue Buffon's

sublime but gloomy theory, that this earth which we inhabit will at some fũture period be changed into a mass of frost.—Do you who assert the supremacy of Ahriman imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death and frost, sculptured in this their terrible magnificence by the unsparing hand of necessity, & that he casts around him as the first essays of his final usurpation avalanches, torrents, rocks and thunders ... and above all, these deadly glaciers at once the proofs and the symbols of his reign.—Add to this the degradation of the human species, who in these regions are half deformed or idiotic and all of whom are deprived of any thing that can excite interest and admiration. This is a part of the subject more mournful and less sublime:—but such as neither the poet nor the philosopher should disdain. It presents views development of which I reserve for conversation.
Today, we departed on the promise of a fine day to visit the glacier of Montanvert in that part where it fills a flat valley, and is called the sea of ice. This valley is 950 toises, or 7600 feet above the level of the sea. We had not proceeded far before the rain began to fall, but we persisted until we had accomplished more than half our journey, when we returned wet through.

CHAMOUNIX July 25.

We have returned from visiting this glacier: a scene in truth of dizzying wonder. The path that winds to it along the side of a mountain now clothed with pines, now intersected with snowy

hollows is wide & steep.—The cabin of Montanvert is 3 leagues from Chamounix, half of which distance is performed on mules, not so surefooted but that on the first day the one which I rode fell, in what the guides call a 'mauvais pas,' so that I narrowly escaped being precipitated down the mountain. — The guide continually held that which Mary rode ... We passed over a hollow covered with snow down which vast stones detached from the rock above are accustomed to roll. One had fallen the preceding day a little time after we had returned. The guides desired us to pass quickly, for it is said that sometimes the least sound will accelerate their fall.—We arrived at Montanvert however, safe. On all sides precipitous mountains the abodes of unrelenting frost surround this vale. Their sides are banked up with ice & snow broken and heaped up and exhibiting terrific chasms. The summits are sharp and naked pinnacles whose overhanging steepness will not even permit snow to rest there. They pierce the clouds like things not belonging to this earth. The vale itself is filled with a mass of undulating ice, and has an ascent sufficiently gradual even to the remotest abysses of these horrible deserts. It is only half a league (about 2 miles) in breadth, & seems much less.—It exhibits an appearance as if frost had suddenly bound up the waves and whirlpools of a mighty torrent. We walked to some distance upon its surface,—the waves are elevated about 12 or 15 feet from the surface of the mass which is intersected with long gaps of unfathomable depth, the ice of whose sides is more beauti-

fully azure than the sky. In these regions everything changes and is in motion. This vast mass of ice has one general progress which ceases neither day nor night. It breaks and bursts forever; its undulations sink whilst others rise. From the precipices which surround it the echo of rocks which fall from their aerial summits, or of the ice and snow scarcely ceases for one moment. One would think that Mont Blanc was a living being & that the frozen blood forever circulated slowly through his stony veins.

We dined—Mary Clare and me on the grass in the open air surrounded by this scene. The air is piercing and clear. We met I lament to say some English people here, I will not detail to you the melancholy exhibitions of tourism, which altho' they emanate from the snobisms and exigences of these vulgar great corrupt the manners of the people, and make this place another Keswick. But the inhabitants of Cumberland are not for a moment to be compared with these people, on whose stupidity, avarice and imposture engender a mixture of vices truly horrible & disgusting. In the evening we returned to Chamounix. The next morning we returned thro' the rain to St. Martin. The scenery had lost something of its immensity, thick clouds hanging over the highest mountains; but visitings of sunset intervened between the showers and blue sky between the accumulated clouds of snowy whiteness which brought them; and all the charm of its grandeur remained. We repassed 'Pont Pellisier' a wooden bridge over the Arve and the ravine of the Arve.

We repassed the pine fōrests which overhang the defīle, the chateau of Saint Michel a haunted ruin built on the edge of a precipice and shadowed over by the eternal fōrest.—We repassed the vale of Servox, a vale more beautiful because more luxuriant than that of Chamounix:—Mont Blanc fōrms one of the sides of this vale also, & the other is enclosed by an irregular amphitheatre of enormous mountains, one of which is in ruins and fēll 50 years ago into the higher part of the vallēy: the smoke of its fāll was seen in Piedmont and people went fŕom Turin to investigate whether a volcano had not burst fōrth among the Alps. It continued fālling for many days spreading with the shock and the thunder of its ruin consternation thro' the neighbouring vales and destroying many persons.—In the evening we arrived at St. Martin.—
The next day we wound through the vallies which I have described before, and arrived in the evening at our home.—
We have bought some specimens of minerals and plants and two or three crystal seals at Mont Blanc, to preserve the remembērance of having approached it.—There is a Cabinet d'Histoire Naturelle at Chamounix, just as at Matlock and Keswick & Clifton; the proprietor of which is the very vilest specimen, of that vile species of quack that together with the whole army of aubergistes and guides and indeed the entire mass of the population subsist on the weakness and credulity of travellers as leeches subsist on the blood of the sick.—The most interesting of my purchases is a large collection of the seeds of rare Alpine plants,

with their names written upon the outside of the papers which contain them. These I mean to colonize in my garden in England; and to permit you to make what choice you please of them.—They are companions which the celandine, the classic celandine need not despise.—They are as wild and more daring than he, and will tell him tales of things even as touching and as sublime as the gaze of a vernal poet.——Did I tell you that there are troops of wolves among these mountains? In the winter they descend into the vallies which the snow occupies during six months of the year, and devour everything they find outside of the doors. A wolf is more powerful than the fiercest and strongest dog.—There are no bears in these regions,—we heard when we were at Lucerne that they were occasionally found in the forests which surround that lake.—
We returned from St. Martin to our temporary home thro' the vale of the Arve.—

August 2, 1816.

I have kept this letter some days that you might derive at least the advantage from its magnitude of not receiving another on business.—But not having heard from you in the meantime I send it now.—I write to Hookham by this days post to inform him that I am to receive money, and that I mean to pay him.—I write also to St. Croix. Be so kind as to write for me to Furnion't to say that it entirely arose from an omission that his bill was not paid, and that you will speedily settle it for me. The coal man to whom I owe L18 may wait, but it

would be as well to speak to him or write to him to assure him of payment. In giving you these commissions I am using the priviledge of a friend, a priviledge which the interest I know you take in my concerns and so far as I care for it myself, my reputation will engage you to allow me. They will instruct you also in the continuance of my determination to return to England, and domesticate myself in the home which I hope you are preparing. I enclose you a draft for L25, having heard from Longdill that the sale of my things at Bishopsgate was done by his order, and that I should receive very little from it.—Receive it on my account & disburse it at you own discretion. You had better send the draft to the bankers in a letter signed with your name, as I have omitted to insert the word 'bearer' lest it might be lost.—If Hookham is curious about me you may show him this letter; I am glad to hear from your account that he does not withhold from me the justice which I am conscious I deserve.

Always yours faithfully

PERCY B. SHELLEY.

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